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WHO USES OUR PARKS: RESULTS OF THE 1986 RECREATION SURVEY

by Linda J. Penaloza

Only a fraction of Wisconsin residents regularly use our state parks. Without a good comparison of these users to nonusers, it is difficult to define what influences some people to visit state parks and others not. I designed the 1986 Wisconsin Recreation Survey for three purposes: to sample from the population of users (those who used the state parks in 1986) and nonusers (those who did not use the state parks in 1986); to differentiate levels of use between users for comparisons; and to measure the differences between users and nonusers to determine the factors that might account for recreational choices. I also wanted to study the reasons for non-participation: lack of interest, time, money, access to facilities, etc.

By studying the needs of state residents who do not regularly use state parks, we can gain the knowledge that we need to increase the total number of users in state parks and to provide important and meaningful outdoor recreational experiences for more people.

I drew a random sample of 1,373 Wisconsin state residents using 1986 Department of Transportation records of those who held a valid Wisconsin driver's license. These persons ranged in age from 16 to 87 years. The surveys were mailed immediately after Labor Day, 1986. By November 3 a total of 972 surveys had been returned, giving a response rate of 76%. Nonusers of state parks in 1986 made up 65% of the respondents. That is, of those Wisconsin state residents aged 16 years and older who held a valid Wisconsin driver's license, 65% did not visit the state parks in 1986, and 35% did.

Users vs. Nonusers

Nonusers differed from users in important ways, and these differences showed both state and nation-wide trends that will affect the recreation industry.

My study results showed that nonusers of state parks in 1986 were, on average, about 6 years older than users. The mean age for users in 1986 was 40.4 years, and for nonusers it was 46.5 years. The mean age of the population of driver's license holders was 41. The median age of Wisconsin state residents rose from 27.2 to 29.4 between 1970 and 1980 (Blue Book, 1986).

This fact is important because the demographics of the country are changing. As the baby boom generation reaches late middle age,

the use of state parks may steadily decline, unless the needs of this older group of recreationists can be met. I studied the desires of this older group with the assumption that they represent this aging population. Satisfaction of their needs may not require drastic changes or over-building of parks, but rather more attention to issues such as security, noise enforcement, cleanliness, accessibility, and admission discounts.

Compared to users, nonusers in my survey reported that they had fewer hours available weekly for recreation, and fewer days available annually for vacation. This discrepancy may result in decreased use of state parks and increased competition with recreational activities found outside of parks. With the increase in two-career families, it is becoming more difficult to plan long vacations and to coordinate time off from work for long trips around the state or country. The summer family vacation trip of several weeks is disappearing, and is being replaced by weekend trips throughout the year to closer destinations for shorter stays. Even the types of recreational activities are changing. This trend can mean that people possess fewer basic wilderness skills and that they rely more on facilities and comforts.

Recreational Participation

My study results showed that nonusers occasionally had the same desires and concerns as users, although their priorities might have been different or the emphasis not as strong. For example, while users had the most hunting or fishing licenses, many nonusers still obtained licenses. This showed that nonusers occasionally participated in some outdoor recreational activities.

For every recreational activity suggested in my survey, there were some nonusers who had engaged in it, both as children and within 12 months of the survey. Users were more likely than nonusers to engage in each activity - except watching television - but there were some nonusers involved in all activities. When asked to list their favorite outdoor activities, nonusers listed fishing and hunting as the top two, while the activities they would engage in more if they had more time were fishing, camping, and hunting. If they had more money, this group would dine out and sightsee more often. This finding showed a strong tendency among nonusers to engage in both consumptive (i.e., hunting, fishing, trapping) and nonconsumptive (i.e., birdwatching, hiking, photography) outdoor recreation, if the factors that kept them from participating were reduced.

My study results showed that childhood experiences with outdoor recreation were significantly related to the activities that adults chose. Respondents who had not been exposed to recreational activities as children were not likely to engage in those activities as adults. Socialization into an activity as a child then was a major factor in an adult's choice of recreational activities.

Barriers to Participation

The reason most frequently cited by respondents for not using state parks was lack of time. Nonusers in the survey indicated that they, on average, had less free time and less paid vacation time than users. They also mentioned that, compared to users, they had more difficulty recreating and they had to travel further to find adequate facilities. What leisure time was available, however, was just as important to the nonusers as it was to the users. What differentiated the groups was

the amount and use of that leisure time. Outdoor recreation was less important to nonusers than users as a way of filling available leisure time.

Past research has shown that transportation is a major barrier to the use of state parks. I found other barriers, including lack of interest in state parks along with a lack of information. These two responses are linked. While nonusers and users in my survey shared some outdoor recreational interests, the nonusers did not participate in them at state parks. But since the nonusers were interested in activities offered at the state parks, I assumed that if they had been better informed, they would have used the parks.

Another barrier frequently cited by both users and nonusers was the admission fee. Some respondents were unaware of the amount of the fee or of the fact that those over 65 can get into the parks free, after purchasing a onetime senior citizen card. As long as people are unaware of this, they may not try to visit the parks. As the population ages, there will be more retirees on fixed incomes, making the admission fee a more significant barrier. The barrier of the fee is also part of the barrier of lack of information. Other barriers, which included unsatisfactory facilities, the reservation system, crowding, noise, and security, could be reduced through increased information about other parks in the state park system that might better provide the facilities or recreational experiences desired.

What People Want

When asked what facilities or recreational experiences people wanted in parks, they cited flush toilets, more wildlife, fewer people, cabins for overnight lodging, showers, and more fishing. While park planners may be aware of the desire for flush toilets, they should realize that among both users and nonusers this was the most highly rated item for improving state parks. We should focus concern on these items before making any changes or improvements in park management.

The responses to this survey were biased toward summer use. The finding that respondents would like cabins for overnight lodging is important, however, because the presence of cabins on state park lands might encourage more year-round use.

Summary: The Need for Information

My study results showed that, while the state parks cannot be all things to all people, there were many people who could become regular or more frequent state park users if a greater effort is made to meet their needs. Users and nonusers shared some needs, so greater emphasis on these needs could result in higher quality outdoor recreational experiences for more people.

Information is the key to fuller use of state parks: where they are, how to get there, and what kinds of experiences they offer. How to use the parks, and how to develop new interests and skills that can be enjoyed at the parks are also important pieces of information that can be offered at the parks.

How can we best disseminate this information? My study showed that while nearly half of the respondents read outdoor or travel magazines, nonusers were less likely to do so than users. While magazines might reach some of the nonusers, they would not reach the majority. Nearly all respondents watched television, however, with many listing television as a favorite activity. Television, then, is the best

medium for transmitting information about the parks.

By reaching out to the people who might wish to know more about the beautiful and unique features of our parks, we can turn more state residents into state park users.

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